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ABSTRACT

In recent years, the median age of the college student has shifted dramatically upward so that higher education now serves a more age-diversified population. This phenomenon has vast implications for both student affairs professionals and faculty who are involved in counseling and advising students. College counselors must redefine their roles and recognize adult students as individuals facing very different developmental tasks from the traditional college-age students. Counselors must review psychosocial development theory, cognitive development theory, and empirical evidence to explore the differences between the traditional college-age student and the adult student. The use of life cycle theory in developmental counseling permits counselors to construct a conceptual framework from which they can better serve all students, regardless of age. Counseling approaches and techniques may have to be modified to serve adult students, who have diverse anxieties, concerns, expectations and educational goals. The visibility of developmental counseling services must be increased. College counselors must respond to these challenges through a sound understanding of adults' growth and development and the influences their educational institutions exercise on this growth process. (Author/NRB)

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LIFE-CYCLE DEVELOPMENTAL THEORY AS A TOOL FOR COLLEGE COUNSELORS

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Higher education is in a state of flux. The last of the post-World War II baby boom has graduated from college and is on its way to "aging" our society. The signs are everywhere: in commerical advertising, in the job market, and in higher education. In recent years, the median age of the college student has shifted dramatically upward (Cross, 1979). Some university populations have already reached a median age of 25 or more. If one adds the population of students served by continuing education programs, it is possible to visualize higher education as graying around the edges.

What is causing this "graying" of higher education? The literature abounds with reasons and explanations for the rising student age. Cross (1979) suggests that it is a result of a chronological age change, increased opportunities for equal access, and a perceived need for retraining or reeducating to stay abreast of technological change. In addition to necessitating education, technological advances have reduced production hours as reflected in increased leisure time.

The consequence of this aging process in college students is that higher education is now serving a more age diversified population. Participation by adults in higher education is increasing five percent per year, and predictions indicate that by 1990, there will be three times as many students over 25 years of age as those under

25 (Chickering, Halliburton, Berquist and Lindquist, 1977). These facts have vast implications for both student affairs professionals and faculty who are involved in counseling and advising students.

THE DEVELOPING ADULT

The influx of adult students will cause modifications in the missions of higher education. Clearly, adult students are not simply traditional college students who are, by definition or coincidence, older. By virtue of their age, adult students have different perceptions, ideas, and expectations about their education. Counselors (including faculty advisors) must appreciate the differences between our traditional clientele and those that our biases tell us to classify as older adult students. Counselors must be able to see adult students not as traditional college age students, but as individuals facing very different developmental tasks.

One method counselors can use to explore the differences between the traditional college age student and the adult student is to review psychosocial development theory. Psychosocial development theory holds that individuals advance through a chronologically determined series of stages or phases. At each stage, the individual is faced with one or more developmental task or crisis. The successful resolution of these developmental tasks allows the individual to proceed on to the next stage or level (Havighurst, 1972; Erikson, 1950; Gould, 1978; Creamer, 1980).

In addition to employing psychosocial development theory, the concept of cognitive development theory is used to facilitate an understanding of adult students. Cognitive development theory is based on the premise that individuals progress through a series of irreversable steps advancing from simple to more complex ways of reasoning and interpreting social situtations and personal experiences. Unlike psychosocial development theory, cognitive development theory is believed to be universal and thus less influenced by the societal context (Widick, Knefelkamp and Parker, 1980).

A third way to analyze the life cycle is by means of what Schlossberg, Troll and Leibowitz (1978) call empirical evidence. These avenues would include; (a) physical development. i.e. how the body grows, maintains and deteriorates over the life span, (b) intellectual development, including the concepts of crystallized and fluid intelligence, (c) sex role development, concerning how men and women develop their roles in relation to societal norms, environments, etc., and (d) personality development, involving formulating and maintaining one's self concept or viewpoint.

Counselors must remember that these theories or assumptions should not be considered as single, independent dimensions of adult development. Rather, they must be considered cumulative and interrelated, yet unique to each individual. People age and mature according to different clocks; therefore, chronological age may not be a specific measure of developmental growth.

CONTRIBUTIONS OF THEORY

One of the main contributions of life cycle theory to developmental counseling is that it permits counselors to construct a conceptual framework from which they can better serve all students, regardless of age. In a practical sense, theories of the life cycle are more than paradigms for understanding adults. They are maps or guideposts that academic counselors, career counselors, faculty advisors, and even organization advisors can use in facilitating developmental growth.

Demographic data such as age, sex, marital status, offspring and educational program selection can often provide the counselor with valuable information about adult students. Although individual differences make it impossible to hinge developmental tasks on exact age brackets, generalizations about age and tasks can be assumed. Counselors can thus identify certain developmental tasks and needs that a student could possibly be facing. For example, a student in the early adult stage could be experiencing one or more of the developmental tasks of selecting a mate, starting a family, managing a home and selecting an occupation. These tasks are different from those of later adult stages which include adjusting to decreased physical strength, reduced income and changing social roles (Havighurst, 1972). With this knowledge, the counselor can develop an approach in a direction that best fits the needs of the student while directing questions toward satisfaction with developmental task completion.

In addition to confronting different developmental tasks, adult students are probably encountering more potentially stressful situations than their younger counterparts. Adult students must perform a delicate balancing act in dealing with the problems of distance, time allocation, institutional arrangements and finances. These factors complicate the already stressful task of returning to school and represent a difficult set of concerns for the adult student and the counselor. Thus, in order to maximize their potential for serving adult students, counselors must become familiar with and knowledgable about the various life stage theories and attempt to integrate them into their daily work with adult and traditional age students.

It is important for counselors to recognize that differences can exist in students depending on their progress in moving through the life cycle. The early adolescent and the middleaged student do not come to the counseling session on the same developmental level. Their experiences, expectations and needs are different. The effective counselor will recognize these differences and change the approach and technique accordingly.

THEORY AND PRACTICE

The implications of substantial numbers of adult students entering our colleges and universities are staggering. Curriculum, instruction and academic affairs in general are not the only areas to be affected. This age shift will also

heavily influence the counseling and advising setting. Adults enrolling in colleges and universities face two major barriers. They encounter the usual anxieties of admission, academic competition, acceptance, etc. experienced by all students. In addition, they experience the problem of surviving in an organization that functions at a developmental level they passed through five to fifty years previously. To maximize the effectiveness of counselors serving adult students, the implications from life cycle theories should be incorporated into daily practice.

Tarule and Weathersby (1979) state that "adults tend to enroll in undergraduate programs, particularly liberal arts programs, at times of transition in their lives." Because life cycle transitions are usually identified with higher levels of stress, counselors must recognize the double burden being carried by adult students. The previously stated problems of time and distance are accentuated as adult students are torn between family, school, and their own lives. Knowing that the possibility of these types of anxieties exists, counselors will be better equipped to help the adult student match personal agendas with institutional expectations.

One consequence for counselors is that counseling approaches and techniques may have to be modified when working with adult students. Traditionally, college and university counselors have served students who are developmentally in an adolescent/young adult life stage. Therefore, out of convention, many counselors not only perceive all students

as being in this stage, but also tend to structure the counseling session accordingly. The effectiveness of the counseling session may be reduced for any student not in the adolescent-early adult developmental stage. Thus, to maximize effectiveness, the approach to the counseling session should be reworked. An example would be counseling a student facing the transition of retirement. This situation presents a somewhat different set of concerns for the counselor. O'Brien, Johnson, and Miller (1979) and Rollins (1979) outline parameters counselors should be aware of when serving older adults. They include (a) developing heightened listening skills to compensate for verbal meandering, (b) awareness of placement in proximity to the student to compensate for hearing disability or to maximize eye to eye contact, (c) increased use of nonverbal communication, and (d) surroundings that make the client comfortable.

Similarly, the college counselor will have to become reattuned to a clientele with diverse educational goals. Adult students do not express the same educational goals as those voiced by their younger counterparts. The developmental stage of students, combined with experience and external influences, has an effect on why further education is sought and what the expected outcomes are. While educational goals of late adolescents/young adults are assistance in starting a career and building an identity, the goals of adult students may be to change careers, to build a new identity separate from a spouse, or to enroll for pure enjoyment or personal satisfaction.

For adult students, the expectation of a college experience may or may not include degree completion. Many students desire to gain additional knowledge in a particular area without being tied to an entire academic program. This is particularly true if the academic program contains unwanted, unnecessary, and duplicate experiences. The traditional mission of academic advisors and faculty advisors of assisting students to best meet graduation and distribution requirements may not be valid with adult students. Additional time must be spent with adult students to assess not only what they desire from enrolling, but also what their motivations, both internal and external, might be.

In addition to modifications in the counseling session, counselors may begin to assume a role close to that previously reserved for those in the larger community setting. Since counselors will be experiencing students in all stages of the life cycle, they should also be prepared to perceive a variety of developmental concerns. Marriage and divorce, the loss of a spouse, children leaving the home, and career changes are common examples of what the college and university counselor may encounter. Again, the effective counselor will have to modify the frame of reference used with the student.

Counselors will also confront the issue of equal access to university facilities. Colleges and universities that claim to cater to adult students through evening, weekend, or adult programs may find it necessary to shift working

schedules to meet contractual agreements. Students paying the same amount in fees will demand the same services. The difference between availability and access may take on different dimensions as colleges and universities increase their adult student populations.

Finally, the visibility of developmental counseling services must be increased. Counselors may have to initiate a "consumer awareness program" for older students. This might include additional community outreach, personal contact, and increased use of media. An added advantage of increased awareness is that the negative image of the counseling center may be dispelled and replaced with the perception of a service rendering developmental assistance.

NEEDED: NEW MODELS

From the above discussion, it could be concluded that the "traditional" university counselor may become nontraditional. The increase in the number of adult students plus the expanding number of other nontraditional clients will force the counselor in higher education to reexamine the traditional role. Vickers (1973) suggests that the tutor/mentor relationship, the full-time academic counselor, and the peer counselor, although all providing valuable assistance, fail to meet the needs of adult students, particularly those involved in extended or external degree programs. In place of these models, Vickers suggests a learning consultant concept be instituted. This consultant would provide a supportive relationship while serving as both a facilitator of

personal evaluation and goal setting and as an educational activity resource.

This author believes that what is called for is perhaps not a new job description for counselors, but a redefinition of the old. Through a sound understanding of the life cycle with its transitions, stages, and crises, the counselor will develop a strong commitment to the developmental viewpoint. Through the philosophy of helping individuals with personal development, choosing life goals, and decision making, the counselor will be better equipped to help all students, regardless of age. Through this approach, adult students will feel both supported in their academic pursuits and assisted in working through life's transitions.

SUMMARY

This paper has attempted to question counselors working in institutions of higher education about their awareness of the needs and special concerns of the growing population of adult students. Through an understanding of the life cycle, those involved in developmental work will be better equipped to serve all students and particularly those above the traditional college age. Institutions of higher education must recognize the difference between adequately meeting the needs of adult students and simply accomodating them. While expanded hours of service are definitely a beginning to increasing access for adult students, counselors must be aware of the concerns, motivations, expectations, and developmental tasks of

their new clientele. The concept of evening student services as a means to satisfy responsibilities to adult students should not be a substitute for genuine understanding. "Educational institutions serve a legitimizing function for adults to satisfy their continuing needs to grow, and they provide an opportunity to test the 'goodness of fit' between one's current life structure and experience of self" (Tarule and Weathersby, 1979, p. 16). Counselors in higher education settings must respond to these challenges through a sound understanding of both how adults grow and develop and the influences their institutions exercise on this process.

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